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DE RUEHAN #1369/01 3411503
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3978
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0756
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 001369

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SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR AF/E, AF/FO, INR/AA, AND DRL
PARIS FOR D'ELIA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MA](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTION DAY ATMOSPHERE IN TAMATAVE

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REFTEL: ANTANANARIVO 1364 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) BACKGROUND: Madagascar is an island, but it is also a large and diverse country, home to 18 major tribal groups. There is considerable variation in the practice of democracy from region to region and between urban and rural voters; a fact quite apparent in the December 3 presidential election. Thus this message should not be taken as indicative of the process in Madagascar as a whole, but offers a flavor of Malagasy politics on election day in Foulepointe and Fenerive Est, medium-sized towns near the regional capital of Tamatave on Madagascar's east coast. It was drafted by a member of a U.S. Mission election observation unit, one of 25 teams scattered throughout the country to help assure that Madagascar's electoral process would be free, fair and transparent.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM?
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12. (U) Although widely predicted to be the potential epicenter of election-related violence, the historically troublesome Tamatave Province (home base of presidential candidate Roland Ratsiraka and his uncle, former President Didier Ratsiraka), was calm December 2, the eve of the election. With barely a campaign poster in sight, the coastal towns seemed more focused on the upcoming litchi harvest; the dusty streets were full of "pousse-pousse" (rickshaws) carting around foreigners intent on loading their cargo destined for Europe. Contacts from various sectors acknowledged, "All is calm," but categorically added the caveat, "At least for now. You never know what people will do after the results are announced."

ALL QUIET ON ELECTION DAY
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13. (U) When our observation team arrived at the first polling station at 0700 on election day, the queue of voters already snaked around the side of the one-room schoolhouse. The station president gravely shook our hands and showed us how his staff had carefully set out the election materials -- save for the plastic ballot box still in six pieces on the floor. Officials crowded around to figure out how to assemble the box, quickly followed by voters who poured in from outside to shout advice. Thirty minutes and a few bruised egos later, the box was assembled, locked, and in place. One by one, the mostly barefoot voters shuffled into the room: old men wearing straw hats and ill-fitting suit jackets, women with babies perched on their hips, families in their Sunday best on the way to church, and young men clad in ripped t-shirts. Polling

officials prodded the voters into a scraggly line, where they patiently awaited their turn to present their voter cards, select one ballot paper for each of the ten candidates represented (smaller versions of the candidates' campaign posters), and then go behind the tattered sheet serving as a secret voting booth. Proud voters emerged holding nothing but the envelope containing their ballot which they dropped into the ballot box, but bulges under their shirts and waistbands suggested the unused ballots would be taken home as souvenirs or toys for the children.

14. (U) At the following 13 polling stations, we saw the same fairly orderly process with slight variations. Voting locations were at best small concrete schoolhouses, and at worst ramshackle huts covered with palm fronds. Squeezing into the child-sized desks and rickety benches reserved for observers, we watched the voters file into secret ballot booths carefully constructed of tattered sheets, sheet metal, straw, scraps of wood, and -- in one case -- an old bicycle frame. Chickens and cattle mingled with waiting voters, who stood through rain showers under colorful umbrellas or beneath nearby trees. Those closer to the door excitedly jammed up against the windows to watch the proceedings inside. And without fail, we were welcomed with the same seriousness and courtesy by the polling station president and officials.

15. (U) In the course of our observations, we came across one of the observers from the Committee of National Election Observers (CNOE) who had received advanced training from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) financed by the USG. His attention to detail was impressive, as he pointed out apparently minor discrepancies regarding the total number of voters on the last page of every polling station's voter registration list.

ETHNIC RIVALRY PALPABLE, ESPECIALLY AFTER DARK
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16. (SBU) The ethnic rivalry between those living on the coast ("Cotier") and those living on the "haut plateau" (including the

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historically dominant Merina tribe) was more palpable on the coast than in the capital city of Antananarivo. Contacts cautioned us that hate of the haut plateau runs strong around Tamatave. In our first few hours on the ground, our driver was approached by a group of men on the street who warned him to remove his Ravalomanana t-shirt, "or else." Contacts shrugged their shoulders when questioned about rumors that certain neighborhoods in Tamatave had agreed to set fire to the homes of Ravalomanana supporters if he won in the first round, saying, "We always hear such things." Yet, at the same time, they explained to us how people in small towns along the coast are easily manipulated and agitated. They also described how acts of political violence on the coast are directed at persons, whereas around Antananarivo targets are more often official institutions. Since political conflicts in 1991, Tamatave residents have seen occasional incidents of people setting their neighbors' houses ablaze for supporting the "wrong" candidate or political party; or merely for being from the haut plateau.

17. (U) The vote counts we observed were most indicative of these sentiments. Lacking electricity, many coastal residents poured out of their homes to watch the vote count as their Sunday night entertainment. The reaction of the raucous crowds pressed up against the polling station windows was reminiscent of a sporting match. As we observed by candlelight, each time the counter thrust a ballot high in the air and called the candidate's name, his announcement was greeted by screams of support or jeers from the crowd. It was no surprise that Roland Ratsiraka was the crowd's favorite, but we were slightly jarred by the reaction of some people to his ballot papers set on a red background: "Red! Red is for blood! We want blood! Give us more blood!" They then taunted the highland observers in our election observation unit. While these comments made them uncomfortable, at no point did they feel their safety was at risk.

18. (U) At another vote count, at least 80 people had managed to push their way in to fill every corner of the polling station, even standing on chairs and window ledges. As our observation team tried

to push its way into the room, we were stopped at the door by a powerful wave of body heat and odor that made it impossible to enter. With gendarmes standing nearby, this crowd's reaction to the vote count (especially Ratsiraka ballots) was even more vigorous than the first: jumping and dancing, waving banners, pushing, and screaming competing political songs and slogans. Our colleagues from Antananarivo characterized the coastal people's emotional reaction as a call to "take back power" from the Merina.

COMMENT

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19. (SBU) Overall, we were impressed by the seriousness of election preparations and voter participation, although the officials had clearly received inadequate training. In contrast to U.S. voters removed from the counting process as television viewers, the Malagasy take a front-row seat. While we take the ominous undertones of our conversations and observations as election day hyperbole and a natural byproduct of regional rivalries, we will still watch this region closely as the announcement of results draws near. END COMMENT.

MCGEE